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AUTHOR Hickey, John J.
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ABSTRACT

The current debates about cultural geography fall into three categories: (1) arguments for the convergence of cultural and spatial geography; (2) arguments against current reports of the disappearance of culture as a result of increased cultural divergence; and (3) attempts at the reconstruction of culture theory to conform with generally valid rules of social science explanation. The theory of cultural geography attempts to account for the differences in human life at different places and times. Culture theory has its roots in the late 18th century when J.G. Herder took issue with the rationalist approach to human society during the Age of Enlightenment. Herder maintained that the rational method of Newtonian science with its emphasis on the formulation and testing of hypotheses was inappropriate to the study of human cultures. He believed that cultures are integrated social wholes. Although the original questions of Herder and others remain important, they have since become distorted by geographers. The conflicting theories of the relevance of culture to geography all have their shortcomings; however, the resolution is not to dismiss the complex issues but to determine an approach to culture theory that will reveal insights within the conflicts. (KC)

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# Culture Theory in Geography.

John J. Hickey
University of Minnesota

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I.

During the past several years there has been a revival of interest in the relevance of culture to geographic explanation. The opinions expressed range along a broad spectrum from those which see culture as a central concern of geography to those which see it as irrelevant. The discussions of culture can be categorized, for purposes of discussion, into three broad groups.

a). Attempts to reconcile cultural geography to a positivistic-spatial form of geographic explanation. Sopher, for example, writing in the early 1970's sees the separation of cultural and spatial geography as "regretable" and the "engineering of a convergence" as desirable. (1973: 101)[1]

b). There have been calls for the reconsideration of cultural geography as an increasingly, and wrongly, neglected theme. The argument here is couched in traditional terms of the nomothetic/ideographic dichotomy of approaches to geography. Cultural geography studies the individualistic aspect of phenomena. It is argued that individuality is a persistent fact in need of geographic study and that reports of the disappearnace of culture and therefore of cultural geography are greatly ex-

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aggerated. The empirical basis of cultural geography may be in retreat but it is still of some significance. James Coull writing in 1980 points out that less effort is being expended presently in cultural geography than previously was the case. He observes that "it is appropriate that this should be so, as recent decades have seen increased cultural convergence . . ." Coull ends with the hope that "different groups will be able to retain essential elements of their cultural roots . . . " (1980: 107) Cultural geographers are to study the maintenance of these identities and suggest means for their perpetuation.[2]

c). Finally, there are attempts at the reconstruction of culture theory to bring it in line with what are seen to be generally valid rules of social science explanation. In particular, cultural geographers have been taken to task for "holding" a metaphysical notion of culture, i.e., the superorganic. Agnew and Duncan in an attempt to produce an internally consistent and unified geography have ". . . presented a schema which can help human geographers evaluate more effectively ideas that are introduced into the discipline." (1981: 54) Culture when classified according to an exhaustive set of antinomies is seen to be a borrowing which is not logically justified or politically desirable.[3]

The discussions of the relevance of culture to geography have

tended to be carried out at a rather abstract level. Stances toward culture, culture theory, or the "cultural factor" are adopted which are in harmony with the various writers' basic presuppositions as to what constitutes a valid geographic explanation. Culture is viewed as an exotic which is to be fitted in logically somewhere nearer the core or the periphery of geographic work, if anywhere at all. Geographers' ambivalence on the issue of culture and the lack of any detailed discussion of culture theory within the discipline[4] can be attributed to an overly abstract emphasis on the logic of explanation and a lack of attention to the structure and development of conflicting culture theoretical formulations.

Collingwood wrote:

> ". . .whether a given propositon is true or false, significant or meaningless, depends upon what question it was meant to answer; and any one who wishes to know whether a given proposition is true or false, significant or meaningless, must find out what question it was meant to answer." (1938: 38)

The discussion of culture in geography has been carried out generally without due regard for the basic questions to which culture has been seen to provide an answer. This taking of culture out of context has produced a significant distortion in our efforts to come to terms with the issue as geographers. Attention to the questions to which culture has been seen as an answer will aid in clarifying the confusion surrounding its relationship to geography. In this paper I will suggest that the issues that the originators of culture theory took to be important remain important, but that in large measure they have been usurped in geography by practitioners of subfields other than cultural geography. Hence, all geographers, insofar as they are implicitly or explicitly addressing those issues thought central by culture theorists

are themselves advancing theories of culture. There are those who, for various reasons, would declare cultural geography to be moribund, but the issue of culture in geography remains a vital concern.

## II.

The idea of culture in its modern anthropological sense is usually traced back to the decades of the later half of the 18th Century. 5 It may seem gratuitous to remark on the conplexity of the history of the meanings and usage of the term. Herder, early in the modern development of the term remarked that "nothing is more indeterminate than this word." (Williams, 1976: 79) Despite the wide divergences in the development of the concept of culture certain core questions can be identified which focus on some of the most hotly contested issues in geography.

The fundamental querries to which culture has been seen as providing an answer involve attempts to account for the differences in human life in different places and at different times. A myriad of culture theories have developed which have attempted to account for the interaction and relationship of culture elements and for the process of formation of distinctive cultures. Since Tylor's formulation of a definition of culture in the 1870's numerous conflicting theories of culture have emerged in the social sciences. The literature reviewing cultural geography and the literature discussing the relationship of culture to geography tend not to address the core issues which have precipitated the lengthy and heated debate.

Culture in the sense in which it has been commonly used in the social sciences in the late Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries is traced

to the work of J. G. Herder. Herder had taken, in the latter part of the Eighteenth Century, an actively skeptical attitude toward the unilinear approach to culture common among Enlightenment thinkers. Isaiah Berlin sums up the attitude of the Enlightenment in the following:

> "The central doctrines . . . . rested on the belief, rooted in the ancient doctrines of natural law, that human nature was fundamentally the same in all times and places; that local and historical variations were unimportant compared with the constant central core in terms of which human beings could be defined as a species, like animals, or plants, or minerals." (1980: 1)

The methods applicable to the study of human society were seen as similar to those of Newtonian physics. Systematic application of these rational methods could uncover the timeless universal laws by which reality was ordered. The variety of human cultures was attributed to either variations in local environmental conditions or to the contemporaneous existence of human groups at varying stages along a single line of cultural development.

Herder's skeptical, relativist reaction to the philosophes denied a unilineal process of development leading, by implication, to the pinnacle of human achievement -- European civilization. Herder wrote:

> "Men of all quarters of the globe who have perished over the ages, you have not lived solely to manure the earth with your ashes so that at the end of time your posterity should be made happy by European culture. The very thought of a Superior European culture is a blatant insult to the majesty of Nature." (Quoted in Williams 1976: 79)

Herder maintained that the rational method of Newtonian science with its emphasis upon the formualtion and testing of hypotheses was inappropriate to the study of human cultures.

> "Herder set in motion the idea that since each of these civilizations has its own outlook and way of thinking and feeling and acting, creates its own collective ideals in virture of which it is a civilization, it can be truly understood and judged only in terms of its own scale of

> values, its own rules of thought and action, and not thosse of some other culture: least of all in terms of some universal, impersonal, absolute scale." (Berlin 1976: xxii)

The differences between Herder and the philosophes are fundamental. The chasm between them is too wide for a reconciliation to be effected by reference to empirical or methodological fine tuning. For the philosophes human nature has a universal timeless essence which is characterizable in terms of rational Newtonian scientific methods. For Herder, as for Vico before him, human nature is not everywhere the same in essence. Human cultures are characterizable but only by methods radically different from those appropriate to the study of planetary movement, or plants, or minerals. The two approaches differ in terms of their fundamental motives and goals. For the philosophes order was found beneath the "chaos" of human cultural life. Explanation of the dizzying array of contradictory ways of life was achieved by subsuming them under a general law of which they were instances. Herder rejects this view. Order in culture is not discovered by reducing complexity to a system of universally applicable laws. Cultures are integrated social wholes which are intelligible in their own right. Order is found in the coherent patterning of these ways of life.

Similar differences in goal and motive separate contemporary exponents of pattern theories of culture from those who advance social structural theories.(Singer 1968) Fundamental differences exist between essentialist and anti-essentialist, or contextualist, theories of culture. The lanscapes of controversy produced by these conflicting groups is much more complex that the highly schematic "maps" provided in the geographic literature. Rather than denying the depth of conflict or seeking to resolve it by attempting combinations of incompatible theories under some overarching approach, a critical view of theories

of culture may lead to conceptual clarification and a critical appraisal of the presuppositions made by practitioners of various geographies.

III.

If we return to the three groups of discussions of culture theory for a moment we can see some of the shortcomings of the current debate.

a). Those who call for a convergence of spatial and cultural geographies may not have appreciated the fundamental incompatibility of the approaches. Sopher for example ends his discussion of culture in relation to geography by questioning whether, from the perspective of the "ruling spatial paradigm", geographers can any longer say anything concerning culture. Like the Kroeber/ Parsons peace on the issue of the social versus the cultural, it may be a short lived pax and actually serve only to obscure the basic issues involved in each approach.

b). An approach which sees culture as an aspect of phenomena which may be disappearing from the scene may, again, not penetrate the depth of the conceptual divisions which which separate projects such as those of the philosophes and Herder. The conceptual conflict is not resolvable by reference to empirical aspects of phenomena. If anything the "reality" which occupies the central concern of conflicting culture theorists (Herder and the philosophes, culture pattern and social structure theorists) is different at its very root and not simply as a matter

of emphasis. The order sought by Herder and that sought by the philosophes were constituted differently, as were the motives and goals of their studies constituted differently.

c). Finally, the approach to culture theory which submits theoretical formulations to an a priori form of a litmus test, conceals more than it reveals. Duncan and Agnew assume that there is some sort of philosophical monism in the social sciences -- and in geography. All branches of the social sciences are seen as forming a unified whole. The presuppositional approach of this view minimizes the richness of the debate which at times rages over culture theory.

The problem of culture in relation to geography is not susceptible to the empirical or formal approaches which characterize the literature to date. It is not simply a matter of letting the facts speak for themselves of ot the fine tuning of our methodology to have it harmonize with some overarching scientific program. The conflict among culture theorists contains a body of insights which are accessible by an approach which seeks to account for the historical development of conflicting theories and not the glossing over of complexity with facile formulations. An approach to culture which would not dismiss whole complexes of debate and theoretical formualtion as irrelevant according to an a priori set of rules for determining what does and does not constitute valid geographical knowledge would seem to be in order. Concern for the issues which have been at the center of the intellectual debate would allow us to see discussions of culture as something other that the mystical jabberings of decades of

wrong-headed thinkers on their way to the present stage of enlightenment. Concern for the issues would allow us to locate culture as it has been explicitly and inplicitly formulated by geographers in their attempts to deal with similar concerns.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. A general posture of acquiescence to the "quantitative revolution" was a common among cultural geographers in the 1960's and 1970's. Numerous statements were made which indicated the essential commensurability of cultural and behavioral, or spatial, geography. See, for example: H. H. Aschmann 1967 "Can cultural geography be taught." in Assn. of American Geographers. Introductory Geography: Viewpoints and Themes. Commission on College Geography, Publication No.5. P. L. Wagner 1975 "The themes of cultural geography rethought." Assn. of Pacific Coast Geographers, Yearbook 37.

2. Area (5, #2, 1980) published three pleas for more serious attention to cultural geography.

3. See also: James. S. Duncan 1980 "The superorganic in American cultural geography." Annals of A.A.G. 70 (June 1980): 181-198. David Ley 1980 Geography without man: a humanistic critique. Oxford University, School of Geography, Research Paper No. 24.

4. I have attempted elsewhere to demonstrate that "since its inception the literature of cultural geography is replete with references to the fact that culture is not of direct interest to the geographer." John Hickey 1981 "Culture theory and American cultural geography." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the AAG April 19-22, 1981

5. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (Culture. A critical review of concepts and definitions. N.Y.:Vintage) are usually referred to in discussions of the history of the culture concept. Kroeber and Kluckhohn were involved with the forging of a definition of culture which would be generally acceptable in the social sciences. They, thus, emphasized the commonalities among culture theories and tended to play down the differences and conflicts. Raymond Williams has written about the history of the idea of culture in several of his works. These include: (1960) Culture and society 1780 - 1950. London: Chatto and Windus; (1967) "Culture and civilization." in P. Edwards, ed. The Encyclopedia of Philosophy I : 273 - 276. (1976) Keywords; a vocabulary of culture and society. New York: Oxford U. Press; (1981) Culture . Glasgow: Fontana. Also see, F.M. Barnard 1968 "Culture and civilization in modern times." in P. Wiener, ed. Dictionary of the history of ideas. N. Y.: Chas. Scribners Sons I : 613 - 621.